

# The bi-polar information professional — librarians working in archives

Sonya Sherman, National Archives of Australia

In February 1999 I started as a graduate Australian public service officer with the National Archives of Australia. As a librarian, I felt lucky to have been selected from an undoubtedly well-qualified field. However I was soon to learn that I was not the only librarian to 'cross over' to archives, nor am I likely to be the last. The Archives is full of librarians who have been stimulated by the differences and similarities between the two professions.

Working with the National Archives has been a fantastic developmental opportunity for me, personally and professionally. Libraries and archives have many common goals and challenges. By sharing our experiences and broadening our knowledge, both professions (and their professionals) can benefit.

The National Archives of Australia collects the records of the Commonwealth Government and makes them available to the public once the records are thirty years old. They also develop and provide record-keeping advice to government agencies. Most records in the collection are files, but some are photographs, posters, maps, architectural drawings, films, scripts, musical scores and sound recordings. There are also oddities such as 'Hawke — Sausage Making Equipment' and the bit of stump engraved many times with 'save the trees' which is stamped as 'received' by the mail room of a government department. The collection is an excellent resource for the study of Australian history and society. It is housed in repositories around the country, with the head office in Canberra and offices in each State capital and in Darwin.

Each year, the National Archives employs about three graduates in the Canberra office — and occasionally one in each of the Sydney and Melbourne offices as well, as was the case last year. The graduate program runs for a year, at the end of which we were absorbed as ongoing officers. Participants were given the opportunity to experience the full range of tasks undertaken by the Archives. This included activities such as preservation, reference, arrangement and description (akin to cataloguing), collection review, research and policy development, advising government agencies on record-keeping, appraisal and disposal of

records, and participation in promotional events like the Family History Fair. In addition, we completed a number of short courses related to working in the Australian public service and attended various conferences and seminars.

I came into this job knowing very little about archives — what they collect, what they do. After completing the graduate program I now know a lot about the National Archives, but also about other government, business, educational and small archives around Australia and the world. I have established contacts with officers in many other government departments, which are also excellent potential sources of information. For a person who got into this profession because she loves helping people find the information they need, this is very exciting knowledge to have. The general public has limited understanding of the differences between libraries and archives. Information professionals with a broad knowledge of resources can more easily refer researchers to the most appropriate place.

Other areas of our work can also benefit from broader professional knowledge. By working in a similar field with a slightly different focus, you can often view longstanding issues in a new light. Archives and libraries have some common goals and challenges. We are developing new systems to manage an increasing amount of information in electronic formats. We are refining the methods used to classify and describe records and manuscripts. We struggle to preserve items which become fragile with age and use. We are faced with issues such as outsourcing, charging of fees and continual justification of the services we provide. Although archivists and librarians may differ on some of the finer points of what is most important — both professions can benefit from the sharing of knowledge and experience. Why invent the wheel twice, when we can combine our efforts to invent one 'general purpose' wheel which can be adapted for specific uses — bicycle wheel (archives retrieval system); bus wheel (library retrieval system). Working in another field may offer a new perspective on old problems and help break down the barriers to co-operation

that can develop between related professions.

Archives experience can be a great career move for a librarian. Australia is a world leader in archival theory and the development of new systems. The benefits of broader professional knowledge cannot be overstated, and the broadening process is both challenging and refreshing. Like the library, the archives has a section for everyone — whether you are record-focussed, user-focussed or system-focussed! I found the National Archives graduate program particularly beneficial because you are exposed to all kinds of tasks, make many valuable contacts and are strongly encouraged to participate in discussion and debate.

If you think you may be interested, check the National Archives website (<http://naa.gov.au/about/html/employment.htm>), *Public Service Gazette* (<http://www.psgazette.gov.au/>) and Recruitment Services Australia ([http://www.dewrsb.gov.au/group\\_lmrs/rsa/](http://www.dewrsb.gov.au/group_lmrs/rsa/)) for more information. ■

## Do you want to work in Canada?

**Katy Nelson, a Canadian librarian is interested in a six month job exchange with an Australian librarian.**

**She has a science background and would like to work in a university library.**

**Anyone interested in contacting Katy can do so in the first instance by e-mail to Sandy Slade, Document Delivery Librarian at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Sandy's e-mail address is [als@uvic.ca](mailto:als@uvic.ca)**